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AUTHOR Sheras, Peter L.
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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that helpers must often educate parents about the causes of stress and its effects on the parenting process. Parents with difficult children and adolescents often complain not only that their children misbehave or are unmotivated and depressed but that such behaviors create stress in the entire family. Many clinicians report that stress is both the by-product of dealing with difficult children and teenagers and the cause of problems in continuing to parent effectively. A cycle of arbitrary parenting and unacceptable responses gets set up. Highly motivated parents feel powerless and often angry, while many others simply give up. Major factors contributing to stress include child factors such as moodiness or emotional lability, delinquent or antisocial behavior, social isolation or withdrawal, failure to achieve or persevere; parent factors including life restrictions, social alienation, relationship issues with parenting partner, feelings of incompetence or guilt; interaction or relationship factors between parent and child; and life stress events. Interventions to reduce stress can be targeted to the location and type of stress involved. It is important to help parents understand that some of their experience is characteristic of normal families. (EMK)

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Advising Parents with Difficult Children and Adolescents: Managing Stress and Negative Behaviors

Peter L. Sheras, Ph.D.
University of Virginia
Curry Programs in Clinical
and School Psychology
pls@virginia.edu

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Managing stress is a challenge for most everyone. Parents with difficult children and adolescents often complain not only that their children misbehave or are unmotivated and depressed but that such behaviors create stress in the entire family. Many clinicians report that stress is both the by-product of dealing with difficult children and teenagers and the cause of problems in continuing to parent effectively. In many cases, parents are frustrated, confused and hopeless. Their levels of stress seem to contribute to occurrence of more negative behaviors creating a cycle of arbitrary parenting and unacceptable responses by their children. Highly motivated parents feel powerless and often angry, while many others merely give up on their children or parenting in general.

It is often true that in order to help parents deal with their difficult offspring, helpers must educate them about the causes of stress and its effects on the parenting process. Most parents have no way of knowing if the stresses they feel are a result of the normal process of being a parent or pathological turn of events in their lives. They need help in assessing the degree of stress and its causes. In short, they need normative information. Once stressors can be

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identified, the psychologist can help them plan a response designed to change negative behaviors.

Assessing parenting stress

Our research (Sheras and Abidin, 1998), informed by the reports of families and experience of clinicians has demonstrated a number of major factors contributing to parenting stress. These can be assessed through interviewing or through the use of stress measures such as the SIPA (Stress Index for Parents of Adolescents.) Once identified, the amount of stress from each of these domains can help direct appropriate intervention or normalization efforts.

Child or Adolescent Domain (Characteristics of child)

In many cases, perceived stress (all stress is perceived) is attributed to the characteristics of the child being parented. Parents report problematic behaviors most highly correlated with this sort of stress are:

- Moodiness or emotional lability
- Delinquent or antisocial behavior
- Social isolation or withdrawal
- Failure to achieve or persevere

Parent Domain (Characteristics of parent)

Parents may experience stresses, which influence their ability to be effective or address the negative behaviors of their children. The most cogent factors in this domain appear to be:

- Life restrictions produced by parenting
- Social alienation experienced parents' fears
- Difficult relationship with spouse, ex-spouse or parenting partner
- Feelings of incompetence or guilt

Child/Adolescent – Parent interaction (Characteristics of the relationship)

In some cases, despite positive histories or lack of early stressors, a particular parent and a particular child cannot seem to communicate effectively. This seems to be especially the case in middle adolescence. Such problems are seen as stressful by both parties.

Life stress events (Characteristics of the context or environment)

Some families are stressed by the occurrence of events that occur around them. These life events such as, moving, loss of employment, death of family members, natural disasters, etc. can influence the overall functioning of the family unit.

Intervening to reduce stress

Depending upon the location and combination of stresses perceived by the parents, interventions can be designed to target specific domains. Advising parents, consulting with them, and assessing the results are some of the major functions a therapist serves in advising parents with difficult children.

Interventions based upon the child/adolescent domain stresses might include psychotherapy or referral for medication to deal with emotional issues of mood or lability. Antisocial behaviors might be addressed behaviorally, as might issues of withdrawal. Learning or school interventions could target failures to achieve or persevere.

Parent domain stresses could be addressed by parent groups to help reduce feelings of restriction or social alienation, while marital therapy or parenting classes might enhance positive relationships with a spouse or parenting partner. Finally, feelings of guilt or incompetence might be the ameliorated by family therapy or consultation.

Problems created by poor communication could be addressed in a variety of ways by a psychologist including family therapy or even group treatment for the children where they can learn more effective ways to communicate with parents.

General stress identification and management skills can be taught to parents and other family members to help them encounter the outside events that may be causing added stress. Predicting future potential stress may prepare them for a more moderate reaction as well.

Normalizing

Finally, it is important to help parents understand that some of what they experience is characteristic of normal families. They often only need information to realize that they have much in common with other families with or without difficult children. Furthermore, they can see that in the face of typical and predictable stress, they have already demonstrated strengths and some effectiveness.

Reference

Sheras, P, and Abidin, R. (1998) Stress Index for Parents of Adolescents, Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources, Inc.